Towards sustainability in Malaysian international education management

Mohd Ismail Abd Aziz\textsuperscript{a}, Doria Abdullah\textsuperscript{b*}

\textsuperscript{a}Office of International Affairs, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 Skudai, Johor, MALAYSIA
\textsuperscript{b}UTM Perdana School of Science, Technology and Innovation Policy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia International Campus, Jalan Semarak, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Abstract

In line with the increase of international student enrolment for the past decade, Malaysia has placed internationalization as one of key thrusts in transforming its higher education. To be able to compete with other higher education providers, the Malaysian higher education institutions should place focus in the provision of quality academic programmes, international students' support services as well as international students' social and community engagement. Such focus enables Malaysia to achieve its aim of becoming an international education hub by 2020, with a targeted 200,000 international student enrollment into the country. This paper attempts to examine the emergence of Malaysia as a provider for international education and seek to provide recommendations towards creating sustainability in its aim as an education hub.

\textsuperscript{*}Corresponding author. Doria Abdullah. Tel: +607-5538005. Fax: +6075538003. E-mail address: doria2@live.utm.my

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1. Introduction

Malaysia is an emerging contender \cite{1} in international education provider, attracting international students due to its substantial investment in international education initiatives, competitive costs of higher education and the use of English as the language of instruction. The country experiences growth in international student enrolment, particularly after the establishment of the Private Higher Education Act (1996), where non-State parties are allowed to provide higher education services to accommodate the increasing demand not met by public higher education institutions \cite{2}. Recording 86,919 international student enrolments in 2010, the country is at the right path in achieving its aim as an international education hub by 2020, attracting 200,000 international students into the country.

2. Structure and context of paper

This paper aims at understanding internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia by looking at the impact of internationalisation at national and institutional level. The first section of the paper describes the transformation plan of Malaysian higher education leading to its aspiration as an
3. Transformation of Malaysian higher education

The higher education sector in Malaysia has undergone rapid transformation [3] since its independence in 1957, as the State acknowledges its role in elevating the social and economic status of its citizens. The transformation is represented in three distinctive eras: the first era marked by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (1970s-1990s), where social inequality is addressed by ethnic-based quota admission into higher education institutions; the second era (1990s) marked by Asian financial crisis [4], corporatization of higher education institutions and the introduction of Private Higher Education Act (1996), and the third era (2000s) marked by liberalisation and massification of the higher education sector.

The third era is significant in tracking the intensity in internationalisation of Malaysian higher education, where the sector experienced a change in relationship with the State [5]. Non-State actors are entitled to set up and operate private higher education institutions, and public higher education institutions are allowed to diversify their finance sources through corporatisation. There is also a pressing demand for higher education among Malaysians, as the available public institutions are insufficient in accommodating the amount of students in pursuit of tertiary education in the country.

The initiatives in positioning Malaysia as a higher education destination pays off as the number of international student enrolled in the higher education institutions increases. The following table shows the trend in international student enrolment in Malaysian higher education institutions for a period of 8 years:

Table 1: International student enrolment in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), 2003-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public HEIs</td>
<td>5,239</td>
<td>5,735</td>
<td>6,622</td>
<td>7,941</td>
<td>14,324</td>
<td>18,495</td>
<td>22,456</td>
<td>24,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private HEIs</td>
<td>25,158</td>
<td>25,939</td>
<td>33,903</td>
<td>39,449</td>
<td>33,604</td>
<td>50,679</td>
<td>58,294</td>
<td>62,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>30,397</td>
<td>31,674</td>
<td>40,525</td>
<td>44,390</td>
<td>47,928</td>
<td>69,174</td>
<td>80,750</td>
<td>86,919</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a 65% increase in total international student enrolment in Malaysia for the past 8 years, with private higher education institutions as the lead recruiter in international students. The Asia market is Malaysia’s main source of international students, due to its adaptable socio-cultural and linguistic traits, the use of English as medium of instruction, and lower tuition fees and living costs [1]. The country also receives a growing number of students from Africa and the Middle East, due to the targeted recruitment conducted by the State in luring students from these regions after the 9/11 attacks. By the end of 2009, the top ten Middle East countries with the highest international student enrolment in Malaysia are Iran, Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Palestinian territory, Oman, Turkey, Syrian Arab territory and Egypt.

4. Malaysian higher education sector’s responses towards increasing international student enrolment

The Malaysian government views the higher education sector as a means in achieving both income generation and global competitiveness. The State launched the New Economic Model (NEM), a master plan in transforming Malaysia towards a high-income advanced nation in March 2010. Under this new economic growth model, bold reform efforts are placed in the private and public sector, human capital building, knowledge-base and infrastructure, with the hope of driving Malaysia to an advanced nation by the year 2020. Quoting Dato’ Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, the Minister of Higher Education Malaysia,
“The education sector is critical, not just as a means of cultivating first-class human capital and creating social mobility, but also as an engine of growth in its own right. In higher education, our vision is nothing less than to develop Malaysia into a regional centre for excellence in tertiary education. We aspire to produce more researchers and scientists, more engineers and professionals, more specialists and skilled technical talent who can succeed in an increasingly competitive global market...”

The role of Malaysia higher education, in connection with NEM goes two ways: firstly, as a global commodity for trade to the country through the influx of international students into the country, generating an estimated amount of RM 6 billion from the 200,000 international student enrolment in 2020; secondly, building the country’s capacity in knowledge-led activities through increased mobility of students and faculty members and international collaborations in the areas of research and development.

5. Sustainability in provision of international education

The international students’ experience is a measure of satisfaction towards the services provided by an institution, as the institution is a dynamic “service system” with a distinctive “service culture”, and the students are interactive participants of the service delivery process. The value of a service is perceived through the experience students have in obtaining the service and the cumulative effort expended in getting it [6]. i-Graduate, an independent benchmarking, research and consultancy service organisation has identified that 46% of decision made for post-secondary education among international students is influenced by friends, 42% by parents and 38% by university websites [7]. It is also found out that international students expect host institutions to prepare ample facilities and support services in supporting international students’ personal, academic and social experiences [12]. A grasp of international students’ experience would improve the services offered by the institutions. The students’ gestalt view, given a lack of understanding on the organisational structure and scope of responsibility of the institutions, allows administrators to recover a clearer picture of the service offered, and make necessary adjustments that would feed the needs of international students in respective institutions.

Higher education institutions should also provide assurance in the support services provided to international students. As an established international education exporter, the Australian government can be a model of reference to Malaysian higher education as it is committed in ensuring that the international students experience “high quality education, training and social experiences” in Australia. Various researches concentrating on international students’ experience in the country, such as their social connectedness [8], their styles of adaptation [9], the students’ engagement in university [10] as well as their health and well being [11] were carried out in ensuring the higher education practitioners are well aware of the international students’ challenges in the country, hence providing support services that would facilitate the students’ adjustment in personal, academic and social settings. In Malaysia’s context, the network of public and private higher education institutions should be able to coordinate and collaborate in providing quality support services to international students, further emphasizing on the client-based approach in international student management in the country.

In terms of quality academic programmes, Malaysia would need to ensure that the academic programmes offered and audited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) also obtain recognition from international bodies. The programmes offered should also be internationally recognised and relevant to meet global demands. To lure more international students to the country, the higher education sector should consider setting up a common foundation programme or a common structure in enabling credit transfer across the region by utilizing its existing network, such as the ASEAN network under South East Asia Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO). All academic programmes in HEIs should allow credit transfer of any academic related activities through international agreements such as University Mobility Asia Pacific (UMAP) or bilateral arrangements. This includes twinning programmes, short term academic exchange programmes, internships, double degree programmes and overseas research attachments.

The international students’ social and community engagement in Malaysia is an aspect that requires more focus due to the complexities not only caused by the difficulties of the international student in adapting to a new surrounding, but also the unique case within the Malaysian community to effectively
embrace internationalisation and international students as part of the community. The presence of international students will not only affect the campus but also the surrounding community. At the core of internationalisation, the institutions are the bridge that brings together the international students and the local community and ensure that the international students have a positive learning experience that can be uniquely called and branded as the Malaysian Higher Education experience. The Malaysian community primarily must be able to adapt and accept the international students as part of the community, allowing a full integration and the delivery of a positive “Malaysian Hospitality”. As for the international students, Malaysians’ strong hold of beliefs and values that stem from various racial and religious background, all of which is eastern, demands that the international students respect these beliefs and values. The international students are also responsible to mingle and mix among themselves, instead of staying in groups defined by a common race, ethnic, nationality or geographic or political idea.

6. Conclusion

Concentrating on improvements on processes involved in attracting, receiving and retaining international students may just be an innovation in international education development by itself. The inclusiveness in implementation by enablers in international education is pivotal; all levels of management should accept internationalisation of higher education as an inevitable force in global higher education development, and internationalisation should be encompassed through proper coordination and collaboration of all parties in managing and delivering quality higher education services. The international students’ population should be viewed as the institution’s long term investment not just in strengthening capacity and profile of higher education institutions, but also the nation’s source of growth and development.

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References